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The making of ‘Boomergeddon’: The construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a social problem in Britain

Abstract

The sociology of generations has attracted an awakened interest in recent years, sparked in part by high-profile media and policy discussions about the problem of the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation. While this discussion tends to focus on resource issues arising from the existence of a relatively large cohort (for example, pensions and healthcare), it contains an implicit moral critique of the generation associated with the economic ‘boom’ of the Sixties. This article examines the development of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem in British newspapers over a 26-year period, to examine how shifts in the discourse about the Boomer generation relate to wider social, economic, cultural and political trends.

Introduction

The problem of generations is, fundamentally, the mediation between past, present and future, where society is preserved, made anew, and at certain points transformed, by the ‘fresh contacts’ made by new members of society with the existing cultural heritage (Mannheim 1952). A generation’s social and historical location shapes its engagement with the wider trends of a particular epoch, and its association with that moment in history. Yet the development of Mannheim’s theory of generations within a wider sociology of knowledge also indicates that ‘generationalism’ – ‘the systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating the social and political’ (Wohl 1980, in White 2013: 216) – cannot be considered narrowly, as a description of the historical experience of particular birth cohorts: it should also be understood as a way of thinking and knowing. The social and cultural trends of the present day shape the way we think about certain generations, and the import of the concept itself.

In recent years, the generation known as the ‘Baby Boomers’ has become linked to a range of social problems in political, public, and media debate. Phillipson *et al.* (2008) find that ‘boomers are being constructed as a “problem generation”’, and

are 'depicted, variously, as bringing new lifestyles and attitudes to ageing and retirement; or heralding economic disaster; or placing fresh burdens on health and social care services' (Phillipson *et al.* 2008: para 5.2, abstract). White (2013) writes that 'Today's social problems' are conceptualised as 'the problems of *generations*': in public debate over 'baby boomers' and the 'jilted generation', 'problems of debt, access to higher education, housing, pensions, and the health of the environment are all routinely denominated in generational terms' (White 2013: 216).

This paper suggests that the generation known as the 'Baby Boomers' carries an association with the historical moment of the Sixties; indeed, it is also referred to in the literature as the 'Sixties generation' (Edmunds and Turner 2002). The contemporary cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem represents, in part, a critique of the cultural turn of the Sixties, which appears to be personified by the Boomer generation. At the same time, anxieties about the recent global economic crisis, and the apparent unsustainability of the postwar welfare state, have focused concern on to the size of the Baby Boomer *cohort*, and the impact of this may have on pensions, health, and social care services (Pifer and Bronte 1986, Walker 1996, Walker and Naegele 1999). The dynamic here can be situated within the context of a wider 'demographic consciousness', which (over)emphasises the significance of both absolute and relative numbers of older people (Furedi 1997, Mullan 2000).

The fusion, in recent years, of the representation of the Boomer generation as a cultural and as an economic problem is illuminated by the cultural trope of 'Boomergeddon'. This emerged in media reports in 2006 to express a view of the Boomers as both a large and ageing cohort, and a generation associated with selfish, hedonistic, reckless behaviour. Below, we examine the features of this cultural trope, and some factors that account for its emergence.

Methodology

This paper is based on a study of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in Britain between the years 1986 and 2011. The study design drew on two distinct, but related, branches of cultural sociology. The first was the concept of a 'cultural script' (Swidler 1986, 2001; Swidler and Arditi 1994; Bellah *et al.* 1996; Hochschild 2003),

and aimed to uncover ‘the way culture is *used*’ (Swidler 2001: 5, emphasis in original) in definitions of and discussions about the Baby Boomer generation. The second was Best’s (2008) elaboration of the role of claimsmaking and rhetoric in the construction of the ‘social problems process’, and aimed to identify the relationship(s) between the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem and the wider contextual dynamics that helped to shape this script, and to give it wider purchase and prominence.

A Qualitative Media Analysis (QMA) was conducted of articles published in the national British press over the period 1986-2011. QMA blends ‘the traditional notion of *objective content analysis* with *participant observation* to form *ethnographic content analysis*, or how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis’ (Altheide 1996: 2, emphasis in original). QMA draws on critical discourse analysis techniques familiar from literary theory, and applied effectively as a method for social science research by Fairclough (2000, 2003); however, it is an interactionist method, which sits within the ‘contextual constructionist’ approach to the analysis of social problems (Berger and Luckmann 1991, Best 2008).

The date period 1986-2011 was chosen for two main reasons. First, analysing the development of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem over time allows us to identify subtleties and contradictions that may not appear when focusing on shorter timeframes. Other studies of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in Britain, such as that by Phillipson *et al.* (2008), have affirmed that the media provides an important vehicle for shaping and disseminating claims and anxieties about this generation. The current study was able to build on these observations about the present day and look further backwards to see how the script developed.

In the early 1970s, the Boomers, as the ‘Sixties generation’ associated with a period of major cultural upheaval and political radicalism, were the subject of a vast amount of academic study and commentary about the new problems confronting, and posed by, youth (Bristow 2015). In the study presented here, the period 1986-2011 encapsulates the changing discussion of the Boomers from the point at which the

eldest Boomers reached the 'middle age' of 40 to the point at which they reach the 'Third Age' of recent retirement.

Second, the Nexis newspaper database includes articles from 1985 onwards; and the use of one database allows for a more stable collection of data than reliance on different newspaper-specific searches. This study used Nexis to search for articles across the national British press using the terms 'baby' and 'boomer'. Theoretical sampling techniques (Altheide 1996: 18-23) were employed to narrow down the number and range of newspapers studied, while retaining the ability to analyse the development of the cultural script over time, across newspapers of different political persuasions, and in both the broadsheet and tabloid press. These techniques comprised coding an initial dataset by theme using NVivo (Version 9) to gain an understanding of the range of discussions; searching across the available range of national newspapers to find 'peaks' in the number of mentions of the Baby Boomers; selecting a range of four broadsheet and tabloid newspapers that might be expected to present different perspectives; and selecting the 'most relevant' 10 per cent of articles, as defined by the Nexis search, from the later date periods, when the large number of articles found precluded a detailed analysis of the whole dataset.

The final dataset consisted of samples drawn from the *Times*, the *Guardian* (and *Observer*), the *Daily Mail* (and *Mail on Sunday*) and the *Mirror* (and *Sunday Mirror*), from the date periods 1986-7, 1992-3, 1998-9, 2006-7, 2008-9, and 2010-11. The searches over these date periods generated a total of 1,747 articles, of which 268 were analysed in depth.

Findings: The making of Boomergeddon

Initial searches resulted in four observations. First, media interest in the Baby Boomer generation has grown over time. Second, newspaper articles link the Baby Boomers to a range of social issues and personality attributes, from health issues to sexual behaviours to a distinct set of cultural interests. Third, the particular issues or attributes that come to be linked to the Baby Boomers are related to the political, social and cultural context in which the article in question was written.

The fourth finding, and the focus of this paper, is that while the Baby Boomer generation has been of some *interest* to newspapers for a number of years, and some periods (for example, 1992-3) reveal particularly high levels of commentary about this generation, it is only in recent years that the Boomers have been constructed predominantly as a *problem* in the mainstream press. To put it another way: it is only since about 2006 that the cultural script of the Baby Boomers has hardened into the (overall) consensus that this generation ‘took their children’s future’ (Willetts 2010) and has ‘trashed’ the ‘wonderful inheritance’ of the welfare state (Beckett 2010b).

It should be emphasised that the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem is far from stable: indeed in certain periods, the tone of the coverage is generally positive about the Boomers, and represents the ‘Sixties generation’ as a *solution* to the social problems of that time, rather than their cause. This reflects the existence of much literature and commentary that has emphasised positive characteristics or behaviours attributed to this generation. Such literature in turn reflects the wider discourse about *ageing*, which has been informed both by an acknowledgement of the ‘Third Age’ (Laslett 1989) as a recent, demographically and culturally significant feature in the life course, broadly reflecting social progress and enhanced life expectancy; and also by a more pessimistic outlook emphasising the problem of changes in the dependency ratio, and pressures on pensions and health care systems (Mullan 2000, Pifer and Bronte 1986).

The attributes associated with the Baby Boomers identified in the media discussion also reflect a shift in wider sensibilities about the *political and cultural* developments that have come to be associated with the Boomer generation. For example, in the late 1980s, relatively few articles appeared discussing the Baby Boomers, and these tended to associate them with the music and counter-culture of the Sixties, musing on the fate of this self-consciously youthful generation as its eldest members approach their forties (Turner 1986a,b,c, *Times*).

By 1992-3, we can see a clear ‘spike’ in the number of articles mentioning the Baby Boomers. This is accounted for by the election of President Bill Clinton in the USA, which is widely reported as a ‘generational’ election with great significance for Britain: ‘The Baby Boomers come of age’ (*Guardian* 1992); it is ‘Woodstock in

Washington' (Macintyre 1992, *Times*). Media reports at this time display some ambivalence about how a generation known for its opposition to established forms of culture and politics will fare as the political elite: 'Now it's their turn to rule... but what, you might wonder, do you do as a sequel to 12 years of protest?' (Palmer 1993, *Mail on Sunday*).

The cultural script of the Baby Boomers in the early 1990s draws on the historical association of the 'Sixties generation' with radical politics, and positions this generation, in middle age, as heralding a shift away from the 'old' politics of left and right (Giddens 1994). The overall tone is one of cautious optimism about the 'political legitimization of the cultural advances ushered in by the sixties' (*Guardian* 1992) that Clinton's election was widely perceived to represent.

By 2010, however, the overall tone of the cultural script is overwhelmingly negative. This in part reflected the publication of three high-profile British books: *The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children's future – and why they should give it back*, by government minister David Willetts; *Jilted Generation: How Britain Has Bankrupted its Youth*, by journalists Ed Howker and Shiv Malik, writing in their late twenties; and *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us – How the children of the sixties lived the dream and failed the future*, by left-leaning playwright Francis Beckett. A further pamphlet – *It's All Their Fault*, by Neil Boorman, described by Machell and Lewy (2010) in the *Times* as '[a]s much a screed as analysis' – gained some attention by virtue of being published at the same time. All four books 'seek to explain the political, social and economic factors that have combined to create the unusual (and for many, difficult) situation where parents seem to have had it better than their children. Some try to apportion blame' (Machell and Lewy 2010).

The influence of claimsmakers such as David Willetts on the present-day discourse indicates the extent to which the presentation of the Baby Boomer problem is, by this point, explicitly endorsed and shaped by the political elite. The impact of ideas about intergenerational conflict on the formulation of policy in the USA, Europe and Britain has been noted for some years (Walker 1990, 1996; Walker and Naegele 1999), and the development of such policy is discussed further below.

What is distinct about the period between 2006 and 2011, however, is the extent to which this policy trajectory comes together with wider cultural, demographic, and economic concerns to create a media discourse that is one-sidedly hostile to the Baby Boomer generation. This is exemplified by the motif of ‘Boomergeddon’.

2006: The coming of Boomergeddon

In 2006, cultural commentator James Harkin was already writing in the *Guardian* about ‘a thundering backlash’ against the familiar, affectionate stereotypes of the Boomers as a generation associated with good times and good music:

‘Balding, Wrinkled and Stoned’ was the less-than-flattering strapline for a *Time* magazine last month, one which painted a picture of a generation whose continued proclivity for illicit drugs is embarrassing even their children. In a barrage of new books, too, social critics from both right and left are taking aim at the new middle-aged. (Harkin 2006)

Harkin’s article is titled ‘Boomergeddon’, named after ‘the not-too-subtle working title of a new book being written by the American sociologist Mike Males’. In 2006-7, the phrase ‘Boomergeddon’ recurs in British media discussions of the Baby Boomers; and analysis of the articles using it reveal three interesting features.

First, there is no record of a book of this title published by Mike Males: indicating a high level of receptivity in the British press to the American cultural trope of ‘Boomergeddon’, before the critique itself was published (indeed, if it ever was). (Searches did reveal a book by James A. Bacon published in 2010, titled *Boomergeddon: How Runaway Deficits Will Bankrupt the Country and Ruin Retirement for Ageing Baby Boomers – And What You Can Do About It*, and promoting a rather different theme.) Second, this is a discussion that begins in the USA, which is then imported into the UK via commentary on the Baby Boomers in Britain: despite the markedly different demographic and social characteristics of the Boomers on each side of the Atlantic. Third, the trope of Boomergeddon fuses anxieties about the demographic and economic impact of the Boomer generation

approaching retirement with a moralised cultural critique of the attitudes and behaviours associated with the Sixties generation.

Backlash against the Sixties: The Boomers as a cultural problem

Two months after Harkin reported on Mike Males's 'Boomergeddon' claim in the *Guardian*, the trope appears as central to essay by the commentator Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail*. Phillips begins with similar observations to Harkin: there is a 'renaissance' in live rock concerts 'fuelled in large measure by middle-aged fans – the "baby-boomer" generation born in the great surge of procreation and optimism that took place between the end of World War II and the early Sixties'. She continues:

This is the generation that, through its sheer numbers and awesome purchasing power, has forged the culture of the post-war Western world in its own image.

It is also a generation, I would argue, that is gripped by the need perpetually to rebel. But now there is a backlash. (Phillips 2006)

Phillips briefly outlines Mike Males's claim, which contrasts the Boomers' alleged degeneracy with the responsible behaviour of the young:

Californian boomers, he says, suffer staggeringly high levels of drug abuse, imprisonment and family instability. They have the worst rate of violent death; fatal drug overdoses between the ages of 40 and 60 have increased by 200 per cent over the past 35 years; and more and more of them have Aids.

The young, meanwhile, who are demonised by their parents' generation and subjected to overwhelming and unnecessary restrictions, are moderating their smoking, drinking and drug use, while school dropout rates, youth crime and teenage pregnancies and suicides are all down. The generation blame game has flipped on its head. (Phillips 2006)

The notion that the 'normal' generational pattern has 'flipped on its head', with the young now taking responsibility for their dissolute elders, is the image that is later proffered by David Willetts in his introduction to *The Pinch*:

We all know the story. The parents return home from a night away to find a teenage party has got out of hand and the house has been trashed. Every few months a particularly dramatic episode gets into the media – with distraught parents tidying up a mess left by a swarm of young people summoned on Facebook. It plays to a deep-seated fear that younger people will not appreciate and protect what has been achieved by the older generation. This is the eternal anxiety of each generation about what comes after. But what if, when it comes to many of the big things that matter for our futures, it is the other way round? What if it's actually the older generation, the baby boomers, who have been throwing the party and leaving behind a mess for the next generation to sort out? (Willetts 2010: xv)

The metaphor of the Baby Boomers having thrown a 'party' and expecting their children to clear up the 'mess' continually recurs in the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, as a shorthand way of expressing a variety of related ideas. It represents the claim that British society in 2010 is experiencing a reversal of the normal pattern of generational continuity and conflict, in which the older generation worries about the extent to which their successors will appreciate and conserve society's gains and achievements. In Willetts's argument, things today appear to be 'the other way round', where it is the older generation that has 'trashed' the metaphorical house, and the younger generation is left with the task of restoring order to chaos.

The chaos, or 'mess', of the present day is conceptualised as the outcome of the turmoil of the Sixties – in particular, the questioning of established norms and values, and the heightened focus on the self (Jenkins 2006, Lasch 1979, Marwick 1999). In the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem, these trends are considered to be personified by the Boomers, and now they are allegedly taking their toll: on the bodies of the Boomers as they reach retirement age; on their children, who bear the brunt of having to 'clear up the mess'; and on the wider social fabric.

Phillips acknowledges that 'huge and complex cultural trends such as family breakdown, sexual licence or drug-taking can't all be laid at the boomers' door'. Nonetheless, she makes a clear argument that affluence and peace-time are intimately

linked to the narcissism and nihilism of the Baby Boomers, 'the generation which still marched behind the banners of the ultrafeminist, family-smashing, bourgeois-hating radical politics of the Sixties in which they had grown up'. For Phillips, it was the 'unprecedented prosperity' of the Boomers that gave them:

...the means finally to flesh out trends going back to the 19th century, arising from the collapse of religious belief and the emergence of a doctrine of radical individualism. This had been held in check by the national emergencies of two world wars and a world depression, but after 1945 there was no longer any impediment to letting rip with a cult of 'me', a licence to be irresponsibly self-indulgent and never grow up. (Phillips 2006)

In Phillips's account, the circumstances that allowed the Baby Boomers to have 'so much influence' also help to explain why they have 'used it to such socially destructive ends'.

Harkin offers a further example from the 'barrage of new books' criticising the Baby Boomers. This is *Balsamic Dreams*, by the American satirist Joe Queenan (2001), which 'accuses baby boomers of self-importance, narcissism and selling out', and was published in the UK in February 2006:

The boomers, [Queenan] argues, lived it up on state subsidies in their salad days and are now determined to kick away the ladder of social security for everyone else. Their determination to be different, he says, has turned sour and embarrassing. He pokes fun, for example, at the way in which American boomers are customising their own funeral services into a mixture of stand-up comedy and karaoke. (Harkin 2006)

Phillips also references Queenan, and transposes his observations onto the British context:

With their children departed and the mortgage paid off, [the Baby Boomers'] spending power is greater than that of any other age group. They use it to pump up their lips and suck out their thighs, go trekking in Peru and work out

in the gym, eat organic food and irrigate their colon to cheat death and anticipate several more decades of looking after Me.

They claim credit for all the good things that have developed in the 60 years of their existence – greater tolerance, an end to racial discrimination, a kinder, gentler, more compassionate world.

But presented with any of the bad things – the shattering of the family, the breakdown in civility, feral children, the drug epidemic, the burgeoning of mental illness among the young, increasing contempt for the aged – they savagely disclaim any responsibility. (Phillips 2006)

In this way, humorous reflections on Baby Boomer excess, as in Queenan's book or the cult British sit-com *Absolutely Fabulous*, have become the metaphor for more serious critiques of social breakdown, perceived political mismanagement, and economic crisis (Vine 2008, 2010; Sandbrook 2010). This reveals the extent to which perceptions and quasi-fictional representations of 'Boomer culture' have come to serve the function of a metaphorical 'hook' on which to hang social criticism in the present day. However, such criticism has much deeper roots than a simple distaste for the caricatured hedonists of *Balsamic Dreams* or *Ab Fab*. Below, we consider some of the deeper anxieties that inform claims about 'Boomergeddon'.

Demographic consciousness: The Boomers as an economic problem

Beyond the commentaries by Harkin and Phillips, the Boomergeddon trope plays a role in framing some of the more concrete events indicating the potential problems allegedly caused by an ageing population. For example, in October 2006, the *Times* published an article under the headline 'Golden State faces Boomergeddon as "me generation" turns it grey' (Philp 2006), which brings together the elements of the cultural critique discussed by Harkin and Phillips with an upcoming pensions crisis in the USA. Catherine Philp begins by stating that California 'is a land synonymous with all things youthful, from golden beach babes and surfer dudes to twenty-something dotcom millionaires and aspiring young starlets'; but this image is 'to be turned upside down in the coming decade as a tidal wave of retiring baby boomers turns it

from the Golden State to the greyest', with the state's 'senior population set to double by 2020' (Philp 2006).

Philp goes on to argue that the Baby Boomers' reluctance to face the prospect of growing old will have negative consequences for that generation and for others:

While they may have been the wealthiest generation, they have also been the highest-spending, enjoying lavish lifestyles their parents could only dream of.

Few have saved adequately for a retirement that may last as long as their working lives. Yet only a third say they expect to scale back their lifestyle. And while past generations may have had their own health problems, baby boomers are bringing a whole new set into their senior years, refusing to let go of their old ways of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. (Philp 2006)

While Phillips emphasised the negative health consequences of the Boomers' 'rock'n'roll' lifestyle, Philp argues that it is in fact, 'For all those ageing rockers... there are many more baby boomers that have been dutifully eating their granola and practising their yoga. But their longevity is likely to be an equal burden on society':

'Living longer will bring more chronic illnesses,' says Patty Berg, the chair of the Californian assembly's committee on ageing, which faces the task of preparing for the onslaught of retiring baby boomers. Half of those who live past 85 can expect to develop dementia.

'The challenges are going to be enormous. No state has ever seen a demographic shift like this. There is no roadmap because it's never happened before.' (Philp 2006)

One of the starkest manifestations of the way that the interests of the younger and older generations are presented as being in conflict can be described as the '**paradox of longevity**'. This is the claim that the improvements in health, wealth and wellbeing that have characterised the generation born in the aftermath of the Second World War are themselves problematic, as they result in people living for longer, often managing chronic health conditions, and requiring sustained support from health and social care systems. While this has been a feature of concerns about ageing in general, it takes a

particularly moralised form in relation to the Baby Boomers, where the problems of the economy and the welfare state are represented as the problems of expectation and lifestyle, and attached to a generation that is culturally associated with hedonistic behaviours. ‘They were the first to enjoy free health care, and had the time of their lives in the Swinging Sixties,’ writes Fiona MacRae (2009) in the *Daily Mail*. ‘But the post-war “baby boomers” are now paying the price’.

The cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem can also be seen as expressing a ‘**paradox of prosperity**’. Here, the hedonism and anti-conventionalism associated with the Boomers is presented both as an unhappy outcome of (relative) prosperity, and a cause of the economic and cultural problems facing societies today. Thus, Melanie Phillips contends that ‘the boomers’ chickens are coming home to roost’. ‘Social irresponsibility is a luxury that is possible only at a time of peace and prosperity,’ she writes:

But with the nation’s security and tranquillity now threatened from within and without, the boomers are getting anxious. So they are beginning to rethink issues such as social cohesion, patriotism and the culture of grievance. But the barren landscape that is now causing them such unease is the one they themselves have laid waste. (Phillips 2006)

For Will Hutton, former editor of the *Observer*, ‘[t]he story of the past six decades is in many ways the story of how we threw off our shackles only to discover that we do need some constraints’; and [t]he debate in the years ahead will not be about how to continue with our baby boomer liberalism, but over how and where we need restraint around some shared principles and rules’ (Hutton 2010). While the critiques contain some differences in tone and example, Hutton, along with Francis Beckett (2010) and other left-leaning critics of what is regarded as the Baby Boomer legacy, appears to regard the impact of the Sixties as just as ‘destructive’ (Hutton 2010) as does Melanie Phillips.

There is a large and varied body of literature about the Sixties and its legacy, as there is about the phenomenon of ageing. I do not intend to dispute many of the insights contained in this literature about some of the problematic aspects of a

developing ‘culture of narcissism’ (Lasch 1979), or the new questions that arise for social policy in engaging with the reality of ageing societies. The concern, here, is about the consequences of a cultural and policy discourse that presents a large, diverse, and living generation as the personification of a complex set of social problems.

Discussion: The cross-national diffusion of the Baby Boomer problem

One striking feature of the current ‘generationalism’ is that the experience of the Baby Boomers is presented as homogenous, both within the Boomer generation itself and between the Boomers in Britain and those in the USA. From the election of President Clinton onwards, this elision of quite different experiences emerges as a notable feature of the construction of the Baby Boomer problem in Britain. This speaks to the way that generationalism, as a way of thinking, can ‘mask diversity’ in experience (White 2013) and, indeed, lead to inaccurate assumptions about historical and demographic change. It also reflects the ‘cross-national diffusion’ (Best 2001) of claims about the Baby Boomer problem from the USA, where this problem was first constructed, to the UK.

The term ‘Baby Boomer’ carries with it two meanings. The first relates to a rise in the birthrate was experienced across North America, Europe, and Australia in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, there were national variations in the pattern taken by this ‘baby boom’. Ian Jack (2011), writing in the *Guardian*, notes that the ‘baby boomer generation’ is ‘a term borrowed from America and quite wrongly applied to the postwar pattern of British birth rates. (Not until 1975 were as few babies born as in 1945; more British babies were born between 1956 and 1966 than in the so-called boomer decade of 1945 to 1955.)’ The demographer Jane Falkingham (1997: 19-21) confirms that there were two ‘baby booms’ in Britain, in comparison to the more ‘pronounced’ rises in the crude birth rate that took place in the USA, Canada, Australia and France. Yet in the present-day cultural script, the demographic characteristics of the British Baby Boomer generation are continually elided with those of their American counterparts: as in Willetts’ definition of the ‘boomers’ as ‘roughly those born between 1945 and 1965’ (Willetts 2010a: xv). This

leads to an exaggeration of the demographic pressures imposed by retiring Baby Boomers in Britain.

The linking of the Baby Boomers to economic problems (and solutions) is most clearly expressed in the claim about ‘intergenerational equity’, which forms the basis of Willetts’s argument about the emergence of an ‘economic generation gap’ (Willetts 2010b, *Times*) and his claim that the Boomers have taken ‘their children’s future’ and need to find ways of giving it back. The concept of intergenerational equity has a history, which again began in the USA. Marshall *et al.* (1993) explain that it emerged in the USA in 1984, and credit this development to the publication, in the journal *Demography*, of Samuel H. Preston’s Presidential Address to the Population Association of America (‘Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America’s Dependents’). Preston (1984) argued that the impact of ‘several decades of abrupt demographic change’ in the USA was the deterioration of conditions for children and the ‘dramatic’ improvement of conditions for the growing elderly population (Preston 1984: 435-6).

The wider impact of Preston’s thesis, including the formation of the organisation Americans for Generational Equity (AGE), reflects the influence of demographic consciousness in debates about economic development in the late twentieth century. Furedi (1997) contends that in debates about population growth and demographic change, ‘Statements about numbers are often driven by another agenda, which is not readily apparent’ (Furedi 1997: 12-13): and this is striking with regard to the growing consensus that ‘intergenerational equity’ is a key issue for the twenty-first century.

As Alan Walker (1996) explains, ‘for largely ideological reasons, an economic-demographic imperative has been manufactured in some countries, with the aid of international economic agencies, to facilitate the restructuring of their welfare states’. Against this ideological backdrop, the “renegotiation” of the social contract – in particular, as it pertains to public pensions – has, at least in Britain and EU countries, ‘little or nothing to do with “intergenerational” conflict’ (Walker 1996: 11). Rather, Walker argues, ‘the “intergenerational equity” debate should be regarded as a

socio-political construct', which is employed as part of a wider ideological assault on the principles and structures of state welfare systems.

The danger of 'generationalism' as a frame for social policy is that social and economic problems become re-presented as the problem of people: in the words of one headline, 'Too many, too old?' (Moorhead 1987, *Times*) This assumption is, in turn, used to frame contemporary claims that, in the words of *Times* economics editor Anatole Kaletsky, 'This is the age of war between the generations'. For Kaletsky, the trigger for the current economic crisis was the 'huge liability, which governments have assumed for the baby-boomers' future pension and health costs, that makes public finances all over the world truly unsustainable'. Indeed, the economic crisis is itself presented as a demographic one:

From this point of view, the true significance of the 2007-09 financial crisis and bailouts was not to make public debts unsustainable, but simply to bring forward by about a decade the unsustainability caused by the ageing of the baby-boomer. (Kaletsky 2010, *Times*)

The term 'Baby Boomer' also encapsulates the paradox of prosperity. It refers to the experience of the post-war economic boom – and here again, there are significant differences in the experiences of Baby Boomers in Britain and America, and within the generations themselves. Whereas the Second World War was followed in the USA by a significant period of economic growth, Britain remained in the grip of national debt and rationing. As the American satirist P. J. O'Rourke remarks in his introduction to the UK edition of *The Baby Boom: How It Got That Way, And It Wasn't My Fault, And I'll Never Do It Again*, 'postwar experience in America was very different from postwar experience in a place where war, in fact, occurred. That is, we had the "post-" and you had the war' (O'Rourke 2014: loc. 77:3510). Even the wealthiest British Boomers were not reared in the post-war affluence associated with their US counterparts; and on both sides of the Atlantic, the largest proportion of the Baby Boomer cohort(s) is not wealthy, and never has been.

In this respect, too, the label of 'Baby Boomer' has the effect of flattening out arguably more significant national and social divisions between individuals who

happened to be born at the same time. The demographic character of the 'Baby Booms' in Britain is very different to that of the USA, as is the structure of its welfare system. Yet as the 'Boomergeddon' motif exemplifies, the British media discourse of the Baby Boomer problem has eagerly 'borrowed' the features of the US debate to frame the discussion in the UK.

Meanwhile, research within the UK consistently highlights the diversity of fortune and experience within the Baby Boomer generation, and the extent to which people's experience within later life is shaped by factors of social class, income inequality, employment, (ill) health, gender, ethnicity, and family support networks as much as, if not more than, by their generational location (see Leach 2007, Phillipson 2013, Pilcher 1995). Indeed, as Scherger *et al.* (2011) suggest, in their study of leisure activities and inequality in retirement, this challenges the idea that the 'new old age' has become a reality for most people:

The Third Age as imagined by Laslett (1987, 1996/1989), a time of new activities and self-development, has not become reality, notwithstanding that the prospects of a continuing active lifestyle after retirement seem to be good for most retirees, and that some privileged groups come close to Laslett's vision. (Scherger *et al.* 2011: 167)

A similar argument about the gulf between 'the myth and marketing of the new old age', and the actual experience of aging in the US today, has been made by the US writer Susan Jacoby (2011), who describes today's 'received wisdom' that growing old is merely a question of attitude as 'a new, more subtle, but no-less-pernicious form of ageism' than the stereotypically negative attitudes about old age (Jacoby 2011: 7-8).

Conclusion

The qualitative methods employed by this study enable us to grasp the interplay between social context and the way that, at particular times, the Baby Boomer generation is depicted and the significance that is accorded to its existence and actions. Following Mannheim (1952), we are able to see that the Boomers exist as a social generation, constituted by their engagement with the wider social forces

surrounding their coming-of-age. At the same time, the consciousness that this generation constitutes a social problem is informed by the wider social forces operating in the present day. The generationalism of today's cultural script seeks to find causes and solutions to economic and cultural problems in the realm of ideas about generations and their individual members.

Rather than encapsulating the experience of a particular generation or birth cohort, the term 'Boomergeddon' can be seen to combine an articulation of crisis thinking in relation to the economy and the social structures of the postwar period, with an overt statement of generational conflict. By the autumn of 2006, a number of core themes have already been played out around the fear of the consequences of the Baby Boomer generation reaching retirement. This discussion precedes the global financial crisis of 2007, but draws upon wider anxieties about state spending, the impact of an ageing population, and a perceived crisis of social control arising from the dominant outlook of the 'Me Generation' (Phillips 2006; Philp 2006; Wolfe 1976).

In this regard, we can suggest that pre-existing fears about the impact of an ageing population are *moralised* through a critique of the attributes and behaviours associated with a particular ageing generation. Simultaneously, a latent anxiety about the effects of the changes brought about by the Sixties are *concretised* through a focus on the economic and demographic pressures linked to a large cohort reaching retirement age. 'Boomergeddon' here appears as a politicised variant of the wider Baby Boomer discussion. Thus Philp concludes her article:

'(Baby boomers) are going to make some difficult demands on the younger generation,' says Mr Males. 'I predict open inter-generational warfare.'

That, at least, is something the baby boomers know about. (Philp 2006)

As Walker (1990, 1996) and others have indicated, an important aspect of the construction of social policies around notions of inter-generational conflict derives from an ideological challenge to the postwar welfare state, in which claims about the problem of 'inequity' about the relations between generations have been marshalled to legitimise a renegotiation of the social contract. In this respect, claims about the

present-day problem of the Baby Boomers do not derive from public opinion: they have their roots in policy discourse in the USA, which later comes to be adopted in the UK. The study presented here has identified the way that, in recent years, these claims have gained more prominence in national British newspapers; a development that is significant in terms of promoting a re-framing of social problems in public discussion.

This study does not speculate about the degree to which the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem has been internalised. Given the extent to which individuals' experience of generations remain powerfully shaped by affective bonds within the family, and by the persistence of (arguably more significant) inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender, we should not assume that the cultural script presented by newspapers is deeply shared by their readers. It is striking that concerns about inter-generational conflict seems today to be incited primarily, not by younger generations themselves, but by opinion-formers within the political and cultural elites. However, the discourse of 'Boomer blaming' is no less benign for that.

The failure of the rhetoric of the Baby Boomers to capture the factual reality of this generation's existence leads us to conclude that this is a case of rhetoric in the absence of content. It relies on an *a priori* understanding of who the Sixties generation is, and the problems that it causes: an understanding partially borrowed from the discussion in the USA, where such claims have also been critiqued (Quadagno 1990, Rix 1990, Walker 1996). The character of the cultural script of the Baby Boomer problem should also give us pause, in revealing that what seems to be a critique of the Baby Boomers as a *specific* generation can, in fact, represent the mobilisation of envy and antagonism by the young against older generations *in general*: the theme of Ivan Turgenev's classic 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. When, as White observes, generationalism becomes a 'leading register of political discourse' (White 2013: 217), its divisive consequences are quick to manifest themselves in claims about 'open inter-generational warfare' (Philp 2006) and an 'age of war between the generations' (Kaletksy 2010).

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